

India as USA's Counter-balance to China in West Asia

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1. Abstract

This paper investigates the dynamic landscape of great power competition in West Asia, with a particular emphasis on the U.S.-China rivalry. By centring on India's role as a counter-balance to China, the study scrutinises historical ties, the deepening Indo-U.S. partnership, and the evolution of foreign policies. Examining economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions, the research elucidates collaborative endeavours between India and the U.S. to shape West Asia's geopolitical landscape. The study offers insights into the region's transformation, underscoring India's strategic significance in countering China and its broader implications for global stability.

It introduces the central theme of great power competition in West Asia, with a specific focus on the U.S.-China rivalry, highlighting the pivotal role of India in this context. It addresses key challenges within the geopolitical landscape of West Asia, such as the implications of the U.S.-China rivalry and the need for a counter-balance, particularly through India's strategic involvement, a glimpse into the forthcoming recommendations which include emphasising the imperative need for collaboration between the U.S. and India, especially in security aspects like defence and intelligence sharing. Additionally, it suggests expanding trade and investment ties, with a focus on technology and innovation to address global challenges. It further underscores the importance of responsible governance and international cooperation in addressing shared challenges. Recommendations encompass conflict prevention through diplomacy, economic and financial stability through regulatory frameworks while touching on the significance of people-to-people ties, cultural exchanges, and respecting sovereignty for fostering trust and regional stability which advocates for a comprehensive approach that integrates diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives to promote lasting peace and prosperity in the region.

2. Introduction

In an era defined by rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics, the strategic landscape of West Asia has emerged as a focal point of global attention. The region, known for its vast energy resources, intricate web of alliances, and complex historical narratives, has become a crucible of international politics and power struggles. Central to this evolving geopolitical chessboard is the burgeoning rivalry between two of the world's most influential nations: the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. As both superpowers seek to expand their influence and secure their interests in West Asia, a new player has increasingly emerged as a pivotal counter-balance i.e. India. The rise of China as a dominant actor in global affairs, coupled with its growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, has generated significant concern within the corridors of power in Washington. Simultaneously, India, long seen as a regional powerhouse in South Asia, has expanded its diplomatic and strategic footprint westward. This shift in India's foreign policy calculus has

brought it into the heart of the great power competition between the United States and China, particularly in West Asia.

The geopolitical landscape of West Asia, often referred to as the Middle East, has been marred by complex historical legacies, regional conflicts, and global power struggles for decades. This region, rich in oil and natural gas resources, holds immense significance not only for the nations within it but also for global superpowers vying for influence, stability, and energy security. Against this backdrop, the rise of China as a global power and the United States' enduring presence in the region have set the stage for a multifaceted great power competition.

Understanding the intricacies of these evolving dynamics in West Asia is essential for comprehending the broader global balance of power. The region's significance as an energy hub, its role in regional conflicts, and its potential to shape the course of great power rivalries make it a focal point of international attention.

3. U.S.-China Rivalry in West Asia

The U.S.-China rivalry in West Asia has become a focal point of global geopolitics, driven by a convergence of strategic, economic, and regional factors. West Asia's pivotal location, vast energy resources, and complex conflicts make it a battleground for influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has propelled it into a prominent economic role, with investments in infrastructure and energy projects across the region. Meanwhile, the United States, long reliant on West Asian oil, maintains security alliances and military presence to safeguard its interests and maintain influence. This economic and strategic competition is further complicated by differing regional priorities, as countries in West Asia have varying degrees of alignment with the U.S. and China. Iran's growing ties with China and its adversarial stance toward the U.S., alongside Israel and some Gulf states' strong U.S. alliances, illustrate the region's intricate dynamics. The U.S.-China rivalry in West Asia holds implications not only for regional stability but also for the broader global balance of power, making it a critical geopolitical threat in the 21st century.

- 3.1. Geopolitical Dynamics in West Asia** Geopolitical dynamics in West Asia, also known as the Middle East, are marked by a complex interplay of regional conflicts, power struggles, and the involvement of global actors. The region's strategic significance, primarily driven by its vast energy reserves, has attracted the attention of major powers like the United States, Russia, and China. Conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia have contributed to instability and humanitarian crises. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded its economic footprint, while the U.S. has historically been a key player in the region. Recent developments include growing partnerships between Israel and some Gulf Arab states, Iran's nuclear negotiations, and Turkey's assertive regional role. West Asia's geopolitical landscape remains fluid, with ongoing shifts and challenges that have implications far beyond the region's borders, impacting global energy markets, security, and diplomacy.
- 3.2. U.S. Interests in West Asia** The United States has a diverse set of interests in West Asia, spanning economic, political, security, and strategic domains. Foremost among these interests is energy security, as the region is a major source of global oil and natural gas supplies, making it crucial for maintaining a stable global energy market. Additionally, West Asia has been a focal point in the global fight against terrorism, with the U.S. actively engaged in counterterrorism efforts in the region. The U.S. is also a strong supporter of Israel and has played a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ensuring regional stability and preventing conflicts is another vital interest, as turmoil in the region can have far-reaching economic and security consequences. The prevention of nuclear proliferation, particularly concerning Iran, and the cultivation of strategic alliances and partnerships are also central to U.S. policy in West Asia. These interests, along with efforts to promote democracy and human rights, continue to shape U.S. foreign policy in the region.
- 3.3. China's Engagement in West Asia** China's engagement in West Asia has seen a significant upsurge in recent years, driven by its burgeoning economic interests, energy demands, and geopolitical ambitions. At the heart of its involvement is the region's vast energy resources, as China, the world's largest energy consumer, seeks to secure a stable supply of oil and gas. This quest has led to extensive investments in West Asia's energy sector, including long-term contracts, infrastructure development, and energy exploration. Furthermore, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded into West Asia, resulting in significant infrastructure projects and trade connectivity. Beyond economic engagement, China has deepened its diplomatic involvement, mediating in regional conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the Syrian conflict. With its growing economic influence, China is positioning itself as an increasingly significant player in the dynamics of West Asia, raising both opportunities and concerns on the global stage.

4. India's Role in West Asia

India has a multifaceted role in West Asia that has evolved. Historically, India maintained close cultural, economic, and diplomatic ties with the countries in the region. In recent years, its role has expanded significantly due to its growing energy needs and efforts to enhance economic and strategic engagement. India is a major importer of oil from West Asia, making it imperative to ensure stability in the region for its energy security. Additionally, India has sought to bolster economic ties through investments, trade, and infrastructure projects, aligning with its broader "Act East" policy. Politically, India maintains diplomatic relations with countries in West Asia and plays a role in regional discussions, particularly on issues like counterterrorism and peace in Afghanistan. India's approach in West Asia is characterised by a delicate balancing act, maintaining strong relationships with various countries in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, while also striving to foster cooperation in regional and global matters.

4.1. Contemporary Strategic Interests- In contemporary times, India's strategic interests in West Asia encompass a complex blend of economic, security, and geopolitical considerations. Foremost among these is energy security, as India heavily relies on the region for its oil and gas supplies, making a stable energy flow from West Asia crucial for its economic growth. Additionally, India seeks to expand its economic footprint in the region, enhancing trade and investment partnerships to bolster its economic interests. The growing threat of terrorism and regional instability underscores the importance of security cooperation with West Asian nations. Protecting the well-being of its sizable diaspora in the region and ensuring safe maritime routes for trade are also paramount interests. India's diplomatic engagement in West Asia includes active participation in regional forums and peace initiatives, aligning with its vision of promoting stability and security in the region while preserving its non-aligned foreign policy principles.

In addition to this, it's worth mentioning that India's strategic interests in West Asia are influenced by its relations with various countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states. Balancing these relationships while pursuing its core interests requires a nuanced and pragmatic foreign policy approach.

4.2. Key Alliances and Partnerships India has strategically cultivated key alliances and partnerships to enhance its global standing and advance its national interests. Among these, the Indo-U.S. partnership is pivotal, characterised by growing defence cooperation, counterterrorism efforts, and diplomatic alignment. India's historical strategic partnership with Russia remains significant, particularly in defence procurement. Additionally, India is a member of the Quad, which includes the United States, Japan, and Australia, and focuses on ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. In the BRICS group, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, India collaborates on global economic and political issues. Furthermore, India participates in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), fostering security and economic cooperation in Central Asia. Bilateral relationships with countries like Japan, France, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates also contribute to India's comprehensive approach to international engagement. These alliances and partnerships demonstrate India's commitment to diversifying its global relationships while advancing its core strategic and economic objectives.

5. U.S.-India Relations in the Context of West Asia

U.S.-India relations in the context of West Asia have become increasingly significant as both countries seek to navigate the complex dynamics of the region. One of the primary areas of cooperation is energy security. Both the United States and India heavily rely on oil and gas supplies from West Asia, making the stability of energy flows a shared concern. The U.S. and India have explored ways to work together to ensure the uninterrupted flow of energy resources from the region, including discussions on energy diversification and renewable energy initiatives.

Counterterrorism and regional stability are also prominent features of their engagement in West Asia. Both nations have a strong interest in countering terrorism and extremism that threatens the stability of the region. They have cooperated on intelligence sharing, counterterrorism efforts, and initiatives to combat extremist groups. This cooperation aligns with their broader efforts to promote peace and security in the region.

In summary, U.S.-India relations in the context of West Asia are characterised by a mix of cooperation and challenges. Energy security, counterterrorism efforts, and regional stability are areas of common interest while managing differences on issues like Iran and the Israel-Palestine conflict remains a complex diplomatic task. As the dynamics in West Asia continue to evolve, the U.S. and India will continue to engage in the region to safeguard their interests and contribute to its stability.

5.1. Bilateral Agreements and Cooperation Bilateral agreements and cooperation between the United States and India have deepened and diversified over the years, fostering a multifaceted relationship between the two countries. In the realm of defence and security, foundational agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA have strengthened military ties, enabling joint exercises and technology sharing. On the economic front, both nations have worked to expand trade and investment through dialogues like the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum, promoting economic growth and job creation. Technology and innovation partnerships have flourished, with initiatives like the U.S.-India Science and Technology Endowment Fund driving scientific research and collaboration. Additionally, joint efforts in healthcare, exemplified by their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have showcased their commitment to global public health. Addressing climate change and environmental concerns has become a priority, with the U.S. and India partnering on initiatives for clean energy and sustainable development. These bilateral agreements and collaborations demonstrate the strategic importance of the U.S.-India relationship across a spectrum of critical issues on the global stage.

5.2. Alignment of Interests The alignment of interests between the United States and India has grown increasingly pronounced and multifaceted over time. These two nations, with their shared values of democracy, pluralism, and a commitment to upholding international norms, have found common ground in addressing a range of global challenges. Their deepening defence and security cooperation, evidenced by foundational agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA, reflects a shared interest in regional stability and countering common security threats. On the economic front, both countries have recognized the mutual benefits of expanding trade and investment, driving job creation and economic growth. Moreover, their collaborations in technology, healthcare, climate change, and environmental sustainability underscore a joint commitment to addressing some of the world's most pressing issues. This alignment of interests has transformed the U.S.-India relationship into a strategic partnership that not only benefits both nations but also contributes significantly to global peace, prosperity, and innovation.

5.3. Challenges and Areas of Disagreement Despite the growing alignment of interests between the United States and India, there are still challenges and areas of disagreement that need to be addressed. One significant challenge is trade tensions and market access issues. Both countries have had disagreements over tariffs and trade policies, leading to disputes in sectors like agriculture, information technology, and intellectual property rights. Another challenge lies in the realm of defence procurement, as India has diversified its arms suppliers, including purchases from Russia, which can create complications under U.S. sanctions laws. Additionally, India's relations with neighbouring countries like Pakistan and China sometimes diverge from U.S. interests, causing geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, climate change remains a contentious issue, with India emphasising the need for economic development and the U.S. advocating for stringent climate goals. Despite these challenges, both nations recognize the value of their partnership and continue to engage in dialogue and negotiations to address these areas of disagreement and strengthen their overall relationship.

6. India's Strategic Significance as a Counter-balance to China

India's strategic significance as a counter-balance to China in the Indo-Pacific region has gained increasing recognition on the global stage. India's geographical location and its growing economic and military capabilities make it a pivotal player in maintaining regional stability. As China's influence expands across Asia, India serves as a natural and democratic counterweight. The U.S. and other like-minded nations see India as a key partner in upholding the rules-based international order, freedom of navigation, and territorial integrity. Collaborative efforts, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), have emerged to enhance security and promote shared values in the Indo-Pacific. India's role as a counter-balance to China extends beyond military aspects, encompassing economic, diplomatic, and technological dimensions. As these relationships deepen, India's strategic significance in countering China's influence continues to grow, contributing to regional balance and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

6.1. Balancing U.S. and Chinese Influence Balancing U.S. and Chinese influence is a delicate diplomatic challenge that many countries face in today's interconnected world. Nations like India are carefully navigating this balance to protect their interests and sovereignty. India, in particular, seeks to maintain a strategic and pragmatic relationship with both the United States and China. While it seeks strong economic ties with China, recognizing its neighbour as a major trading partner, it is also developing closer security and defence cooperation with the U.S. and other like-minded nations to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India's approach reflects a nuanced understanding of its geopolitical realities, acknowledging the benefits of economic engagement while ensuring its security interests. Balancing these two major powers' interests requires a careful and strategic approach, one that allows India to leverage its position for its development and security while contributing to regional stability and global cooperation.

6.2. Regional Diplomacy Regional diplomacy is a crucial aspect of a country's foreign policy that involves engaging with neighbouring nations and regional organisations to address shared challenges, enhance cooperation, and maintain stability in a specific geographic area. In the case of India, its regional diplomacy extends to South Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and beyond. India has historically played a significant role in South Asian affairs, working to foster economic development, resolve conflicts, and strengthen regional integration. In the Indian Ocean, India's diplomatic efforts focus on maritime security, trade, and disaster response coordination. Additionally, India's "Act East" policy underscores its commitment to deepening ties with Southeast Asian nations and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Effective regional diplomacy not only promotes peace and stability but also advances a country's strategic and economic interests, making it a cornerstone of India's foreign policy in an ever changing global landscape.

6.3. Economic Engagement Economic engagement is a cornerstone of India's foreign policy, reflecting its commitment to fostering economic growth, trade, and investment both domestically and internationally. India actively seeks economic engagement with nations across the globe to expand its economic horizons and leverage its demographic dividend. It has pursued economic partnerships through various means, including bilateral trade agreements, participation in regional economic forums like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and broader international platforms such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). India's "Make in India" initiative and economic reforms have aimed at attracting foreign investment and promoting domestic manufacturing. Furthermore, India has actively participated in initiatives like the Belt and Road Forum and BRICS, signalling its willingness to engage with countries even when there are differing interests. Overall, economic engagement is central to India's foreign policy strategy as it seeks to enhance its economic prosperity, create jobs, and strengthen its position in the global economic landscape.

7. Regional Dynamics and Challenges

Regional dynamics in South Asia present a complex tapestry of opportunities and challenges for India's foreign policy. On one hand, India plays a pivotal role as the largest economy and military power in the region, offering leadership in forums like SAARC and BIMSTEC. However, it faces various challenges such as border disputes with China and Pakistan, which impact regional stability. The presence of extremist groups in neighbouring countries and terrorism emanating from the region also pose security concerns. Balancing its relationships with smaller neighbours to address their concerns and maintain influence while addressing historical tensions is another challenge. Economic integration and infrastructure development initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can have far-reaching implications for regional dynamics. India's regional diplomacy endeavours to foster cooperation, connectivity, and economic growth while addressing these multifaceted challenges to ensure South Asia's stability and prosperity.

7.1. West Asian State's Reactions The reactions of West Asian states to India's foreign policy are influenced by a range of factors, including historical ties, economic interests, and regional dynamics. Many West Asian countries, particularly in the Gulf region, have significant Indian expatriate populations and are important trading partners. As a result, they often seek to maintain positive relations with India to protect their economic interests and secure remittances from Indian workers. Additionally, India's energy security is closely tied to the region, as it is a major importer of oil and gas from West Asian states. However, West Asian nations also navigate delicate regional politics, and their reactions may vary depending on their alliances and rivalries in the region. India's policy towards Israel, for example, can impact its relationships with Arab states. Overall, West Asian states generally appreciate India's non-interference policy and its diplomatic engagement in regional conflicts, which aligns with their desire for stability and economic cooperation in the region.

7.2. Security Concerns Security concerns are a paramount aspect of India's foreign policy. The country faces a range of security challenges, both internal and external. Internally, India grapples with issues such as insurgencies, terrorism, and border disputes with neighbouring countries, notably Pakistan and China. These challenges necessitate a strong focus on border security, counterterrorism efforts, and maintaining domestic stability. Externally, India is committed to safeguarding its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region, which includes maritime security and freedom of navigation. The evolving geopolitical landscape, with China's growing influence and territorial assertiveness, poses another layer of security concern. To address these challenges, India engages in defence partnerships, military modernization, and diplomatic initiatives aimed at promoting regional stability and security cooperation with its neighbours and global allies. Balancing these multifaceted security concerns is a critical aspect of India's foreign policy.

7.3. Economic Competition Economic competition is a fundamental aspect of India's foreign policy, reflecting its aspiration to become a global economic powerhouse. India actively engages in the competitive global economic landscape, seeking to attract foreign investment, expand trade, and promote its industries on the international stage. The country's "Make in India" initiative and various economic reforms aim to boost domestic manufacturing and innovation, thereby enhancing India's competitiveness in key sectors. India also participates in regional economic forums and trade agreements to tap into new markets and diversify its economic partnerships. This economic competition extends to sectors like technology and innovation, where India aims to harness its large pool of skilled labour and entrepreneurial talent to compete globally. Navigating economic competition while fostering cooperation and mutual benefit with other nations is a central tenet of India's foreign policy in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

8. Recommendations

- **Strengthening U.S.-India Cooperation** Collaboration with India and other nations in South and Southeast Asia to promptly develop a globally recognized maritime code of conduct for the Indian Ocean. The imperative arises from China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea, highlighting the need for a robust and unambiguous multilateral code in the Indian Ocean to proactively address potential issues. Unlike the situation in the South China Sea, the effectiveness of such an agreement in the Indian Ocean is bolstered by India's significant economic and military influence, coupled with China's comparatively limited leverage over many involved actors.
 - Endorse Indian-driven efforts for regional connectivity. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is gaining widespread favour and financial backing across much of developing Asia. Although Delhi has outlined various strategies to boost infrastructure investment across the region, it faces resource constraints to actualize these plans. Support from the United States, both in terms of funding and logistical assistance, can transform these Indian ambitions into a practical alternative to Chinese loans for certain regions of the continent.
 - Given the vital role of Pakistan in combating Afghan militants and concerns about Russia accessing US military technology, the United States must recognize that sharing equipment and technology won't be the main avenue for enhancing India's capacity to counterbalance China. Nevertheless, distancing the United States from Pakistan, especially by minimising arms sales, will significantly enhance American political influence with Indian leaders. The emphasis should be on fostering collaboration with India in areas of common interest and shared values, including counterterrorism, maritime domain awareness, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.
- **Mitigating Risks**
 - The United States ought to maintain its backing for the strengthening of India's alliances with its partners in Southeast Asia. However, as it encourages and, to some degree, engages in the establishment of these connections, Washington should allow them to naturally evolve. Alliances propelled by, and perceived as being driven by, Delhi and Tokyo or Delhi and Canberra will likely endure more effectively in the long run compared to partnerships perceived as being primarily influenced by the United States.

- In response, New Delhi must demonstrate its commitment by translating its "Act East" policy into action, fostering increased strategic and economic collaboration with the region. Additionally, it should overcome its longstanding reluctance toward external powers' involvement in South Asia and explore the possibility of collaborating with the U.S. to influence the strategic and economic choices of India's neighbours, particularly those whose ties with China have grown.
- It is important to explore the idea of establishing an official trilateral dialogue involving China, India, and the U.S. This initiative could fulfil two key objectives: creating a forum to address shared concerns and signalling to Beijing that both India and the U.S. are open to its participation if it actively contributes to finding solutions. Additionally, such a dialogue has the potential to alleviate Indian concerns about being marginalised in a "new kind of major power relationship" between the other two nations.

The U.S. needs to understand that India is likely to forge additional partnerships, including with Russia, as it seeks to balance against China, even if these alliances are not favoured by Washington.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, crafting an effective foreign policy that encompasses strengthening partnerships, mitigating risks, and promoting regional stability is a complex but vital undertaking for any nation in today's interconnected world. Diplomacy and cooperation with like-minded democracies and strategic allies can bolster security and advance common interests. Simultaneously, addressing global challenges, from economic vulnerabilities to health crises and climate change, demands concerted efforts on the international stage. Moreover, fostering regional stability is essential for peace and prosperity, necessitating diplomatic dialogues, economic integration, and security cooperation within regions. Finally, in the context of emerging global powers like China, a balanced and principled approach that combines engagement and the assertion of international norms is crucial for managing complex geopolitical dynamics. Crafting foreign policy that integrates these principles and adapts to changing global realities is key to securing a safer and more stable world for all.

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